

Paul Acker
Testimony Before Judiciary Committee
RE: In Opposition to HB-5531
March 18, 2016

Senator Coleman, Representative Tong, distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee. I am Paul Acker, Executive Director of Focus On Recovery – United, a peer run organization in Middletown. I am here today in opposition to HB-5531, AN ACT CONCERNING THE CARE AND TREATMENT OF PERSONS WITH A MENTAL ILLNESS OR SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

This bill is disturbing on many levels. As a nation we are quick to scold other nations that trample the civil liberties of their citizens, yet our history here with persons diagnosed with mental illness for decades upon decades is to force treatment on them. The Constitution and our ideals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness do not have an asterisk denoting a mental health exception.

Coercion just makes treatment equate to punishment. It separates the provider from the person, making them adversaries instead of partners in the recovery process. HB-5531 damages the very foundation, the relationship between the two, right from the onset. In my ten years working in the system, I have yet to hear a person say, "Thank god they forced me to take meds." Instead, people tend to look at stable housing or the support they received building their foundation again. They cite the relationships to peers, providers and significant others supporting them on their path of their choosing. HB-5531 ignores all of these best practices and segregates persons diagnosed with a mental illness from their inalienable rights.

My agency runs the Peer Bridger service, Anatar miTana, so I see the impact relationship has on the success of an individual. I also see a broken system, where recovery is the shell of the word it once was. Too many providers give lip service to its promise and have fallen back into coercive practices void of hope. Yet HB-5531's solution is to force people into a broken system.

I know from my own experience that force does not work. It may appear to "work" but its benefits are not lasting and its scars can be indelible. Many persons who have had "treatment" forced on them were traumatized by the experience. There has to be a better way.

Our Constitution challenges us as a people to find ways of working with people that respects their rights. For denigrating the rights of one person, denigrates the rights of us all.

Thank you.